



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

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News Release

ICE DISMANTLES MAJOR DRUG TRAFFICKING AND MONEY LAUNDERING RING *Agents arrest 22 individuals in 4 states; seize cash, marijuana, cars & weapons in “Operation Backyard”*

NEW YORK, NY – **Martin D. Ficke**, Special Agent-in-Charge, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) New York, and **Roslynn R. Mauskopf**, the United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, today announced the arrest of 22 individuals in New York, Florida, Arizona and Pennsylvania in connection with a large-scale criminal organization that brought thousands of pounds of marijuana into the New York metro area and laundered the proceeds through various means, including the use of an American Airlines employee to help fly drug proceeds to other states.

As part of the nine-month investigation dubbed “Operation Backyard,” ICE agents have seized roughly \$2.5 million in U.S. currency, 150 pounds of marijuana, seven luxury vehicles, two bulletproof vests, four high-powered rifles, three shotguns, and six handguns. Of the 22 individuals arrested, 12 were located in New York, five were located in Florida, four were located in Arizona, and one was located in Pennsylvania.

“Operation Backyard demonstrates the Department of Homeland Security’s continuing resolve to combat the scourge of drug trafficking,” said Special Agent-in-Charge Ficke. “Illegal drugs and those who smuggle them pose a direct threat to this nation and ICE will continue to aggressively pursue these types of investigations.

The ICE-led investigation was conducted under the auspices of the Justice Department’s Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force, with assistance provided by the Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the Queens District Attorney’s Office, the Port Authority of New York/New Jersey, and other law enforcement agencies.

According to a federal arrest warrant affidavit unsealed in the Eastern District of New York, the criminal organization was headed by **Yvette Warren** and was comprised of members of her family and numerous other associates. The organization allegedly purchased large quantities of marijuana from suppliers in Arizona and transported the drug loads via tractor-trailer to New York and Florida for distribution.

Once the narcotics were sold, the organization relied upon a New York money transmittal business called “Pay-O-Matic” to help launder the drug proceeds, according to court documents. The organization also used couriers to physically transport large quantities of cash back to Arizona. Court documents allege that the

organization relied upon **Denise Saunders**, a woman who worked for American Airlines at JFK Airport, to help arrange for the transportation of cash via couriers aboard American Airlines flights to Arizona.

The investigation was launched in February 2004 after ICE agents began looking into Denise Saunders as a result of a prior investigation into drug smuggling at JFK Airport called Operation Snowstorm. ICE agents soon determined that Saunders was instrumental in organizing and facilitating the transportation of drug proceeds from New York to Arizona, according to court documents. Further investigation revealed that Saunders was working on behalf of the Warren drug smuggling and money laundering organization.

ICE agents employed 13 court-ordered Title III wire intercepts and other investigative techniques to identify and ultimately target the members of this criminal conspiracy.

ICE agents from Tucson, Tampa, West Palm Beach, and Philadelphia were instrumental in the success of this investigation.

“This case is a perfect example of our commitment to identifying and eliminating significant national drug traffickers whose crimes impact so many vital aspects of our communities and their residents,” stated United States Attorney Roslynn R. Mauskopf. “Because it is equally important and critical to our mission, we will continue to ‘follow the money’ and prosecute money launderers who enable these drug organizations to reap the benefits of their crimes. I want to thank and commend the agents of the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement who play such a vital role in the ongoing war on drugs.”

#ICE#

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security.